

2021 State of the City Address



DANIEL HARRIGAN, MAYOR

Mayor Daniel Horrigan

August 9, 2021

Akron Civic Theatre

Thank you, James, and good evening. Welcome to the Akron Civic Theatre.

I want to express my gratitude to the Akron Roundtable, our local downtown restaurants, our City workers and the Civic staff for making this event possible. These dedicated professionals shifted on a dime to host this event indoors in order to ensure the safety of all our guests. Please join me in thanking them for their efforts.

The support of family has never been more important that this past year, Deanna, thank you for 27 wonderful years, Cassidy, Kennedy, Camille, mom and now Luca and Ian too. I consider myself blessed to have all of you in my life, so thank you. And to my entire network of family and friends, your support provides the foundation of my life.

It my pleasure and privilege to serve alongside such a strong and thoughtful leader as Council President Margo Sommerville and all of the members of City Council. To the members who are with us tonight, please stand or wave as we thank you for your service to our community.

The backbone of what makes this city run every day are the 1800 City employees who endured furloughs, uncertainty, sickness, and loss this year – Akron owes you our sincere gratitude. And to my cabinet, who has helped guide this city through incredible

challenges, I am honored to work with each of you. If you are a City of Akron employee here tonight, please stand and be recognized.

Obviously, it has been some time since I've had the opportunity to speak to the Akron community directly, the way I am tonight. 2020 was a year unlike any other. I delivered my last state of the city address last February 26th – just 11 days before the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Ohio.

The economic and social challenges COVID has created, as well as our response to them, will define a generation. This pandemic brought to light suffering that has been happening in the shadows for decades – from housing and food insecurity, the trauma of violence, healthcare inequities, and the devastating impacts of systemic racism. While these realities can be difficult to confront—and let me add, difficult conversations aren't wrong, they're just difficult—we cannot turn away from these challenges. Instead, we have to face them head on, with clear eyes, clear minds, and open hearts.

And while the pandemic has showed us some of the worst realities – it also exposed some of the most inspiring and encouraging facets of our community. From nurses, teachers, first responders, and other essential workers who sacrificed their own wellbeing, to small businesses that pivoted on a dime to fill community needs (often at great expense), and to parents and caregivers who stretched themselves to the limits to care for others under extraordinary challenges. And if we haven't learned to appreciate all those who sacrificed for our community, then God help us.

I have no doubt that every single person in this theatre was touched in life-changing ways last year through loss, struggle, or fear for the future. And tonight I want you to know that I struggled too. This past year and a half have pushed me and my staff to the limits of our abilities and beyond, working to respond to concurrent crises of public health, the economy, and racial unrest.

My top priority is always to keep you and your family safe, and to create pathways for security and prosperity for every Akron resident.

As Mayor, some days the best I could hope for was an opaque view of what was ahead.

But, my faith in Akron never wavered. And while the “how” we bounce back wasn’t exactly clear at times, I never doubted that we *would*.

And today, I’m proud to share the beginning of that path forward – what I see as a solid foundation for our recovery. This isn’t about going back to the ways we have always done things, but creating an even better future. One that works for every single one of us.

The pandemic laid bare the economic realities created by social and racial disparities. Many of our core neighborhoods were just beginning to emerge from the effects of the Great Recession when COVID struck. Our downtown progress was stopped in its tracks. Our small business community – the backbone of our local economy – was brought to its knees. And if you are Black, or female, or on a fixed income, the economic impact of COVID-19 was far worse. While median household income went up across the board in 2020, White Akronites are still experiencing more economic progress than their Black neighbors.

As I said in my speech last year, we need to build a more prosperous, opportunity rich Akron. The pandemic showed all of us, that there is much work to do to achieve that goal.

Yet in the face of these systemic challenges, there is opportunity.

Even during the darkest days of the pandemic, the City responded to the economic devastation brought on by COVID. I used CARES Act funding to keep police, fire, and EMS on the job, allocated over 1.2 million dollars to assist low-income families

with utility bills, provided millions to the United Way for rental and mortgage assistance, authorized 3.6 million dollars for homeless care and shelter aid. And together with the County and the Greater Akron Chamber – we saw to it that over 6 million dollars in local relief funding went to Akron small businesses. I want to take this opportunity to thank County Executive Ilene Shapiro for her partnership during the past year.

Another essential partner throughout this pandemic has been Summit County Public Health and Commissioner Donna Skoda and her staff. They have administered over 67 thousand vaccines, provided thousands of tests, and helped set the tone for how we protect the health of our community.

Public health has been steadfast in their approach, even now as the Delta variant threatens our recovery. The best, and ultimately the only way we will emerge from this crisis is for every one of us to understand the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine. I am urging you to be vocal champions for this life-saving preventative measure – in your workplaces, communities, and families.

And as the vaccine provides increasing protection to our residents, we enter a new phase of this pandemic – our recovery phase. In April, after it was clear our city would receive direct aid from the federal government, I released my framework for how Akron can leverage this one-time money to stimulate economic growth for all. The Akron Recovery Plan lays out six “buckets” of investment that I believe will address systemic disparities and make Akron more competitive in the post-COVID world.

Tonight, I want to discuss some of what I hope to achieve for Akron through the use of our recovery funds.

My Planning to Grow Akron 2.0 strategy details the significant need to reinvest in housing rehabilitation and new infill construction. While our efforts since 2016 have doubled the median sales price for a home in Akron—restoring millions of dollars in home equity lost during the foreclosure crisis—many of our neighborhoods are still not

seeing enough of the benefits. Summit Lake, Middlebury, North Hill, Kenmore, East Akron – and parts of West Akron and Goodyear Heights – are still challenged by aging housing stock, undervalued markets, vacancy, and demolition. We have to restore market confidence in these neighborhoods to retain existing residents, and provide new housing at a variety of levels.

That is why I am proposing a 15 million dollar housing rehabilitation program, as well as a 10 million dollar infill construction program to close the gap between what it costs to build in these neighborhoods and what the market will lend. Targeting both these programs to key neighborhoods, we have an opportunity to transform those areas of Akron hardest hit by past and current economic downturns. Housing has to be, and will be, a large part of our recovery strategy.

Our small business community continues to demonstrate its resiliency as we combat COVID's devastating effects. Access to capital, long a challenge for Akron's entrepreneurs, was evident during the pandemic. Even as hundreds of billions of dollars in federal loans were made available, only 27% of those dollars went to low or moderate income neighborhoods nationwide. In response to these realities, last fall I launched the Akron Resiliency Fund in partnership with the Development Finance Authority. With an initial investment of 2 million dollars from our relief funding, the Fund has been established to eliminate barriers for small businesses in need. And the results have been outstanding. So far 16 loans have been made, with 63% going to Black-owned businesses and 100% going to low or moderate income census tracts. In the months and years to come, I will continue to make entrepreneurship a center piece of my economic agenda, and I believe Akron is well positioned to help existing and new businesses alike, recover and grow.

But we have to do more. We have to be bolder.

I want to speak for a moment about the neighborhood we are all gathered in tonight- Downtown Akron. We have worked diligently and carefully the past 30 years, to

rebuild our center city into a regional job and entertainment destination. We cannot allow the economic heartbeat of our region to fail. Downtowns across the country have taken COVID on the chin, as offices emptied out, bars and restaurants shut down, and parks and theaters closed their doors. Akron is a prime example of this perfect storm.

But we have much to be hopeful about.

Residential construction in Downtown has not slowed, as evidenced by the market demand for new units as soon as they come on line. Lock 3, Canal Park, and the Civic Theater are welcoming crowds again this summer. There is life in Downtown Akron, we are seeing its transformation before our eyes. Together we can emerge from this pandemic stronger than ever before.

To jump start Downtown's recovery, I am proposing an additional 3.5 million dollars towards the renovation of Lock 3, to begin next Fall. Built in 2003 as a temporary space, Lock 3 has always been about economic and community development for Downtown. 17 years later, it has become Akron's "Central Park", a destination for the region, and now it's time to make this "pop up" concert venue a permanent fixture of Downtown's landscape.

Along Main Street, we need to incentivize businesses to stay, and attract new ones to fill vacant storefronts, and so I am planning to allocate 1 million dollars initially to attract and retain retail along Main Street. Additionally, I have partnered with the University of Akron in their Akron Arts initiative, and will work towards a more seamless and impactful connection between the University and our strong urban core. I want to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Miller for his vision, and for his commitment to Akron's future.

More will be needed to assist in Downtown's recovery in the coming years, and I am working with the Elevate Akron partners and key stakeholders to identify more areas where investment is needed. For example, I strongly believe we need a non-profit, real

estate focused organization, right here in Downtown dedicated to promoting economic development in our central city. And in the coming year I will be working to see that such an organization is established.

2020 was also a year that highlighted national wounds, compounded over centuries, with regard to racial justice. In my 2020 State of the City address I said that “across the globe, we are marching in a direction of greater diversity and elevating the voices of historically oppressed populations.” And I shared my vision that Akron would be a “leading example for other communities in this time of inclusion and empowerment.”

I meant those words then, and I mean them now.

As centuries of inequity boiled to the surface, 2020 was a year of protest demanding police reform. I want to be clear on what I see as viable solutions. I am not a fan of defunding or underfunding the police. Instead, we have to focus appropriate resources to address mental health care and effective community policing strategies.

Akron has been ahead of the curve in adopting policies that advance social justice. In the last year and a half, we redesigned and empowered our Police Auditor, in order to create more effective civilian oversight of police. We redesigned our own hiring and purchasing processes to significantly increase the diversity of both City staff and City contracts.

We implemented a ballot initiative mandating prompt release of body worn camera footage, which received support from nearly 90% of Akron voters last November.

And we brought together dozens of dedicated community members to form the Racial Equity and Social Justice Taskforce, led by Bishop Joey Johnson. The Taskforce recommendations, due at the end of the year, will set the stage for even more

growth and progress toward equal access and treatment for all. I urge every one of you here tonight to thoughtfully consider their recommendations and how they could be mirrored within your own organizations. Please join me in thanking Bishop Johnson and all the members of the Taskforce for their efforts.

2020, and 2021 also brought nationwide spikes in violent crime.

Akron entered the pandemic with the highest number of uniformed police officers in over a decade. But one year later, evolving job pressures have led to a wave of retirements, and recruiting efforts have proven more challenging than at any point in a generation. This summer as we sought to hire our next class of officers, HALF as many candidates applied to take the police exam as they did in 2019. This tells us that, all police departments, including Akron, have significant work ahead to develop and recruit a public safety workforce that is qualified, diverse, and properly supported to serve and protect our community.

I'm proud to say that today is the first day in office for Akron's new Police Chief Steve Mylett. Chief Mylett was hired through a transparent process that included a public town hall, private community member interviews, and significant discussion about the issues facing modern police departments in a diverse community like Akron.

I am confident that Chief Mylett will be a strong, ethical leader who will work tirelessly to earn the trust and respect of his department and the community, and who will be a dedicated partner in reducing and preventing violent crime in all of our neighborhoods. For Akron to thrive, it has to be *safe*. I will work alongside Chief Mylett and my public safety leadership team to build new strategies that will break the cycle of violence in our city.

The root causes of gun violence are very complex. As a nation, I think it is time that we had a serious, NON-partisan conversation about access to guns. Despite the rhetoric, I believe there is common ground around limiting military-style weapons,

enhancing background checks, and appropriate licensing. And we also need to ensure that dangerous offenders are off our streets and in jail.

Locally, we are investing heavily in community violence prevention initiatives.

As part of the \$145 million dollars allocated to the City of Akron through the American Rescue Plan, we will be tackling Youth and Community Violence with a robust, sustainable, culturally competent approach, building on the priorities established by the Youth Violence Prevention taskforce, first convened in 2016.

Millions of dollars in ARPA funding will be spent to support youth employment programs and training, improving recreational assets across our neighborhoods, and gun violence interventions for those most at risk of being caught up in the violence as either a perpetrator or a victim.

We will launch our Community Center Reinvestment Program with a renovation of Patterson Park Community Center in North Hill. We will follow that up with 11.5 million dollar renovation of Ed Davis and Perkins Pool in the heart of Ward 3. Next we will make renovations to Reservoir Park Community Center and Pool in Goodyear Heights.

I am also proposing an additional 2.6 million to ensure our multi-million dollar improvements to Summit Lake proceed, and support our ongoing planning efforts with AMHA, Civic Commons, and the Summit Lake community.

Through a call for proposals, I received dozens of outstanding ideas to support grassroots initiatives, aimed at keeping youth and community members away from violence, and on track to achieve their dreams. Over the coming weeks I will evaluate each and every proposal, and make selections for an initial 10 million dollars investment in violence reduction.

But my heart, and my head, both tell me that a big part of solving violent crime in Akron is by giving our young people economic hope. I want us to think boldly about how we create jobs for our high school seniors.

Think of what a year's worth of paid, on-the-job experience could mean to young man or woman as they prepare for one of life's most difficult transitions.

I've had initial conversations with Superintendent Fowler-Mack, and I want to thank her for her willingness to explore this vision further, and see how it can fit within the successful College and Career Academy model.

Helen Keller reminds us that, "although the world is full of suffering, it is also full, of the overcoming of it." Our optimism, as she put it, cannot rest on the absence of evil, but on "a willing effort, always, to cooperate with the good, that it might prevail."

A "willing effort"...that's what it's going to take. This is only the beginning of the journey to rebuild and recover in a just, and prosperous way. COVID has taken from all of us, but it has also provided a generational opportunity to address systemic issues in meaningful ways. We have to harness all the good, created over the past year by a community that rallied together in the face of an existential threat. We have to maintain unprecedented levels of partnership if we hope to take Akron to a better place than we were before the pandemic.

Now that I have laid out my role in leading and helping through the recovery and the systemic challenges we face, I ask all of you, "what are you willing to do?" How can you, or your organization, help a small business thrive? How can our corporate and philanthropic communities help build back momentum for Downtown? How can you, or your company, help a senior citizen safely stay in their home? Or a single parent avoid eviction? Or a CDC build a house on a vacant lot? How can your leadership reduce violent crime by giving an Akron Public School student a job? Or motivate the next generation to stay and invest in this community?

Our recovery requires a whole-of-Akron approach if we want to be successful.

Akron was once called the Rubber City because we made tires, we keep the title now because we are resilient. We bounce back. Not even a global pandemic can keep us down for long.

As a community, we are choosing to tackle difficult issues. And we are doing this, because this is who we are. We often choose the hard thing, because it's the right thing.

People in Akron are strong. We proudly carried the weight of the rubber industry on our back, built the arsenal of democracy through two world wars, and pivoted to polymers when the American tire industry waned. We built the canal that fueled decades of commerce, and still runs through our city to this day.

Great movements find their home here. Sojourner Truth stood alone at the front of a church just down the street to ask "Ain't I A Woman?" Akronites fought to abolish slavery and—through AA—inspired millions around the world to bravely choose sobriety one day at a time.

We are made for moments like this, and we will rise to meet the challenge of our generation. So that our grandchildren will one day look upon us, and our time in leadership, with pride and gratitude. Pride because we made progress on social justice and economic opportunity, and gratitude because their lives were better because of it.

I am confident in Akron's recovery strategy, and in our ability to see it through.

Serving this City as your Mayor is the honor and the challenge of my lifetime. I am more invigorated and inspired now than I have ever been. My faith in Akron, like the state of this City, is resilient, strong, and founded on perpetual hope. Please join me in the work that lies ahead. Together, we can reinvest in Akron at levels not seen in a

century. Leaving a prosperous, more opportunity-rich community for all who come after us.

Thank you. God bless you, God bless your families, and God bless this great city.

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